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Bulgarian Maintains Innocence in Rome Trial

By JOHN TAGLIABUE
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ROME, Oct. 4 — A Bulgarian airline official accused of being an accomplice of the Turk who tried to assassinate Pope John Paul II in 1981 had his days in court this week, and he denied having anything to do with the attempt on the Pope's life.

The official, Sergei I. Antonov, the former head of the Rome office of the Government-run Bulgarian airline, was accused by Mehmet Ali Agca, the convicted assailant, of having helped plan and carry out the plot.

When he took the stand Wednesday for the first of two days of testimony, Mr. Antonov trembled, stared blankly and clasped and unclasped his hands nervously, prompting the chief judge, Severino Santiapichi to inquire whether he needed 10 minutes to calm down.

Mr. Antonov exclaimed: "I want to say! I have nothing to do with this incredible story in which they have involved me!"

Then, pointing to Mr. Agca, who sat implacably next to him, he said, "I am innocent and have never seen or spoken with the man here present."

Questioning by Judge

In the fifth month of the trial of eight men — three Bulgarians and five Turks — that the prosecution accuses of plotting to assassinate the Pope, Judge Santiapichi's questions followed two lines of inquiry:

¶How could Mr. Antonov, a university dropout, former stagehand and part-time librarian, have risen so quickly to a responsible position in the airline?

¶How could he have done so without knowing, as he has asserted, a word of English, the language of international air travel?

Mr. Agca has said he regularly spoke English with Mr. Antonov while planning the attack on the Pope.

Mr. Agca told investigators, in sometimes contradictory pretrial testimony, that Mr. Antonov, the only Bulgarian defendant in Italian custody, helped plan the plot, which Mr. Agca said was masterminded by the Bulgarian secret service, and that Mr. Angonov drove him and a second Turkish gunman to St. Peter's Square on the day of the shooting. Mr. Antonov was arrested in Rome after Mr. Agca's testimony, but has always denied any involvement.

Issue of Language Skills

Mr. Antonov responded to questions slowly, with long pauses, often staring blankly, prmompting the judge to remark, "Sometimes when I ask a question, your look seems to wander in a vacuum, as though the question did not regard you."

The judge pressed him to explain how the Bulgarian airline, Balkanair, could send someone with no knowledge of Italian or English, first to Casablanca, Morocco, and in 1977, to Rome to head the office there.

Mr. Antonov replied hesitantly that he had noted some English phrases referring to aviation "in a notebook" before leaving Sofia, the Bulgarian capital, and learned them.

"What language are airline forms written in?" the judge asked.

"Sometimes in English," Mr. Antonov said.

"They're always in English," the judge replied.

When Mr. Antonov insisted, nevertheless, that Balkanair's forms were in Bulgarian as well as English, the judge ordered court officials to have typical Balkanair documents presented to the court.

The court, however, seemed unable to produce witnesses capable of testifying to Mr. Antonov's language ability. The judge cited pretrial testimony by two witnesses, a former Balkanair stewardess, now living in the United States, and a Bulgarian refugee now living in West Germany. But they testified only that a knowledge of English was generally required of Balkanair employees.

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